Foreclosure aid may help homeowners

Filings up across South Carolina as new program targets hard-hit areas

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The South Carolina State Finance and Housing Authority is awaiting federal approval of a new program to aid homeowners facing foreclosure, as filings continued to rise locally and statewide.

RealtyTrac data released Thursday show foreclosure filings in the state increased 29.2 percent in May from the month before and were 31.4 percent higher than a year ago.

The filings in Greenville County were 8.7 higher than those in April but 6.4 lower than they were the same time last year.

The state Finance and Housing Authority is proposing a plan that would help ward off foreclosure through modification assistance, restructuring, loans, help with monthly payments, and other aid.

The authority's proposed SC Homeownership and Employment lending program would be funded with $138 million in "Hardest Hit Housing Market Funds."

The U.S. Treasury Department has to approve the proposal. Clayton Ingram, spokesman for the state housing authority, said unless the Treasury makes changes, the money would be used throughout the state.

"We may give some emphasis to the counties that are experiencing the worst unemployment, but generally it's statewide," he said.

South Carolina, along with North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, and Rhode Island was chosen earlier to share the $600 million to minimize foreclosures.

The states were selected because they had the highest clusters of people living in counties where the unemployment rate averaged at least 12 percent in 2009, Obama administration officials said.

"Our problem is not necessarily home values. Home values in the state have remained fairly constant, but unemployment has taken its toll throughout the state," Ingram said.

There were 513 foreclosure filings in May in Greenville County, 70 in Pickens, 243 in Spartanburg, 103 in Anderson, 95 in Oconee, and 18 in Laurens. Greenville and Oconee were the only counties that had increases from the previous month.

Charleston County had the highest number of foreclosures last month with a total of 562.

One in every 400 housing units nationwide received a foreclosure filing in May, RealtyTrac said. The filings affected 322,920 U.S. properties that month, reflecting a three percent drop from the previous month and an increase of less than 1 percent from May 2009, according to RealtyTrac.

James J. Saccacio, chief executive officer of RealtyTrac, said May figures confirmed that foreclosure activity is leveling off.

Nevada, Arizona, Florida had the highest foreclosure rates in May.